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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Plan International Norway and Plan Sweden, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2011/1.



Statement*

1. **Statement calling on Governments: to act on pre-existing commitments to eradicate all forms of violence and discrimination against the girl child; to recognize the link between harmful traditional practices and girls' ability to secure educational opportunities and success; to ensure that gender-based violence in schools remains a top priority on the agenda of the Commission on the Status of Women.**

Accountability for past commitments is critical to achieving progress on eradicating all forms of violence and discrimination against the girl child

2. The fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2007 concluded with the Commission urging Governments to take effective and meaningful measures towards ending all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child. Noting a profound concern that "previous goals and targets and commitments, including financial commitments, made with regard to the girl child remain unfulfilled", the Commission highlighted the key role that girls' empowerment plays in breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence and in promoting and protecting the full and effective enjoyment of all their human rights.

3. In particular, the Commission urged States to take strong action to promote girls' education as a powerful transformative tool against poverty and for social development. However, gender-based violence, both in and around schools, continues to present a substantive threat to girls' educational opportunities and life choices, undermining all aspects of their social development, health and well-being.

4. Plan is concerned that in spite of the great advances in the political and legal frameworks protecting the girl child as a young woman and as a child, girls throughout the world are still subjected to discrimination and violence, at school and in the community. In sub-Saharan Africa 12 million girls may never enrol in schools. Although there has been some progress made in advancing gender parity in secondary education, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, in most of Africa less than a quarter of adolescent girls attend secondary school, while in South and West Asia the proportion is less than half. One of the main reasons for low enrolment and high drop-out rates is violence in schools.

Violence in schools is widespread and multifaceted, requiring increased attention and targeted investment

5. Schools are the very place where girls in difficult circumstances around the world can best find the opportunities for self-empowerment, and opportunities for a safer, happier and more fulfilled life. Yet in these institutions, gender-based violence is preventing girls from achieving their potential which begins a cycle of discrimination and abuse that will endure long after school lessons are over.

* Issued without formal editing.

6. In conjunction with its global *Learn Without Fear* campaign,¹ Plan² confirmed that school violence is widespread and multifaceted and sexual abuse and exploitation in schools is a major problem for many students. Girls, in particular, are exposed to a double threat from male teachers *and* students. These findings coincide with those in Plan's annual "State of the World's Girls" reports as part of Plan's global campaign on girl's rights — *Because I am a Girl*.³ Girls are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual exploitation in and around schools, which includes sexual transactions such as good reports or good marks in exchange for sexual acts *or* sexual relations as payment for school fees *or* supplies. This exploitation can also involve male students "offering" girls to teachers in return for lowered fees.⁴

School-based violence is rooted in other forms of exploitation and violence in the community, including harmful traditional practices

7. Harmful traditional practices, such as initiation rites and child marriage, are a culturally driven breach of girls' right to bodily integrity, survival and development. Such practices not only inflict painful and often irreversible long-term damage or death, but also present serious psychological impacts that have repercussions throughout a child's life cycle. Harmful traditional practices deny girls their right to health and to equal treatment, their right to protection and their right to participate in the decision-making processes which affect their life.

8. A major driver of harmful practices is their ability to maintain and more deeply entrench gender norms. Discriminatory attitudes and culture-driven concepts regarding male and female sexuality and roles support and facilitate ongoing gender-related violence in schools and in the wider community. By accepting and not challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes that promote the subordination of girls, schools often create further harm to both boys and girls.⁵

¹ The *Learn Without Fear* campaign focuses on 66 Plan working countries and also aims to create global momentum for change that will improve the lives of millions of children beyond Plan's direct reach. Underpinned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Millennium Development Goals, the campaign has built its impetus created by the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, published in 2006. It has also built on Plan's expertise in quality education, school improvement and child protection. Visit www.plan-international.org/learnwithoutfear or contact campaigns@plan-international.org for more details.

² Plan is one of the oldest and largest international development agencies in the world. It operates in 48 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas and raises funds in 21 countries in Europe, the Americas, East Asia and Oceania.

³ Reports so far have covered the following themes: *The State of the World's Girls* (2007), *In the Shadow of War* (2008), *Girls in the Global Economy* (2009), *Digital and Urban Frontiers: Girls in a Changing Landscape* (2010). All are available at the *Because I am a Girl* global website: <http://plan-international.org/girls/resources/publications.php>.

⁴ Definition of sexual exploitation from the draft document by Plan, UNICEF, Save the Children and Action Aid: *Violence in education, children's right to education denied: evidence from west and central Africa*.

⁵ Leach, F. (2003). "Learning to be violent: The role of the school in developing adolescent gendered behaviour" *Compare* 33(3): 385-398.

Gender-based violence in schools is still the most common factor of student dropout resulting in severe social and economic consequences

9. Gender-based violence begins with the pervasive social practices and norms that place girls in marginalized, subordinate roles, and consequently harmful and inhibitive situations. These practices and norms are often reinforced and amplified by educational institutions — the very places where girls often hope to find opportunities for empowerment.

10. School-related, gender-based violence has a twofold impact on girls. It increases their risk of educational failure and exposes them to negative health consequences such as physical injury, unwanted pregnancy, pregnancy-related problems, sexually transmitted diseases, or emotional and psychological harm. These issues generate reduced motivation among girl students, weakened grades, non-attendance and an increased number of dropouts.⁵

11. Plan's research has shown that:

- Between **\$2.26 billion** and **\$11.34 billion** in foregone social benefits are lost to school violence each year in Brazil.
- Between **\$1.483 billion** and **\$7.418 billion** in foregone social benefits are lost to school violence each year in India.
- Between **\$6.482 billion** and **\$32.414 billion** in foregone social benefits resulting from early school leaving are lost to school violence each year in the United States of America.

12. Eliminating sexual violence is even more pressing when it comes to HIV and AIDS, because adolescents — particularly adolescent girls — have a higher risk of infection than all other age groups. Adolescent girls are biologically, culturally, economically, physiologically and socially more vulnerable to HIV and AIDS than adolescent boys.⁶

Recommendations

13. A wide range of findings, evidence, best practices and recommendations can be found in Plan's global *Learn Without Fear*¹ and *Because I am a Girl*² campaign documentation.

14. Based on these comprehensive campaigns Plan is advocating for adopting a holistic approach to tackling violence against girls in and around schools.

15. **Therefore, we call on Member States to:**

- Develop national strategies to tackle violence against girls in schools.
- Implement gender-sensitive anti-violence regulations to enable systematic reporting of offences.
- Ensure national curricula reflects and promotes human rights standards including, but not limited to, the Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

⁶ USAID's Office of Women in Development. *Equate technical brief: addressing school-related gender-based violence*.

- Require that national education plans include child protection guidelines with special guidance for teachers and staff at schools.
- Federal and national education budgets must earmark funds for addressing violence against girls in schools.
- Ensure child protection commissions have representation from students to guarantee that the voice of children is heard and their opinions taken into consideration.
- Develop coordination mechanisms to link schools with national child protection systems, including child help lines, and introduce mandatory frameworks for reporting on sexual and gender-based violence.
- Increase government and donor investment in hiring, training and promoting female teachers.
- Ensure all legal and judiciary mechanisms work together so that perpetrators of violence against girls and boys including harmful traditional practices are held to account for their actions.
- Invest in national level sex-disaggregated and age-sensitive research on the prevalence and severity of school-based violence and ensure findings from this research inform child protection guidelines in schools.
- Develop systematic data collection on all types of **harmful traditional practices**; especially those that are less known, to better target interventions.

16. Finally, we need to listen to girls' views and ensure that their voices are heard by decision makers. We need to learn from what they have to say. We need to include them in research, in planning and in policies. We need to invest in girls' skills and ensure that they have access to education, the opportunity to make the most of it and the power to protect themselves. We know what girls across the globe can achieve in the face of adversity is truly remarkable. We need to celebrate these achievements and ensure that all girls, wherever they live in the world, have the same chances in life as their brothers.